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ONLINE DATABASES

Books Are Back!

By Carol Tenopir

MORE THAN 1000 LIBRARIANS, publishers, and vendors jammed into the 25th annual Charleston Conference in South Carolina, November 2–5. Created by College of Charleston librarian Kattina Strauch, the meeting brings together everyone in serials and acquisitions.

This year several speakers focused on book collections—print-on-paper books housed in bricks and mortar. Add in the discussions on ebooks and you could feel the back-to-book backlash.

Books in the library future

To keynoter Jerry Kline, CEO of Innovative Interfaces, Inc., the continued growth of e-collections is a given, but some in the audience were surprised at the other two elements he saw in the library future. The bulk of his presentation dwelt on finding ways “to bring them in” to the physical place of the library and the importance of “our books,” which he called “our core that we do so well.”

Bigger collections come from consortial agreements that expand each library’s collection to include those of its partners. There is surprisingly little overlap in large university or public library collections, according to Kline. Effective book collections also need fast delivery and systems easy for patrons and staff to use. Following Kline, some agreed when one academic librarian observed that “librarians request the databases, not faculty or students.”

The book digitization battle

Tom Turvey, strategic partner development at Google, described the firm’s goal “to create a virtual card catalog of all books in all languages.” The user will get three views of books from this giant index. The view of books in copyright and about which the publisher and Google have an agreement will display just enough pages of retrieved books to help publishers sell those books. Publishers asked that library links not be displayed on this view for selling, but Turvey didn’t

rule out the possibility that Google might change that later. The view of library books in the public domain will display entire ebooks along with the OCLC libraries holding the print version. The view for books held by libraries but still under copyright will show just snippets of content along with links to library holdings and to Amazon for purchase.

Only Google Print was represented at Charleston, but add the recent announcements by Amazon, Yahoo, Random House, and Microsoft, along with international institutional and governmental plans, and it becomes clear that the battle of book digitization has been joined.

New models

The digitization of books, whether they were born that way or digitized later, allows a variety of distribution

“Libraries do nothing—they are a tool that librarians use.... they are the best way to manage the knowledge base”

models. Print-on-demand, among other forms, will help the scholarly monograph become a more efficient method for distributing scholarship, according to Colin Steele, Emeritus Fellow of the Australian National University (ANU). At Charleston, Steele summarized the problem: “If a monograph is priced too high, no one will buy it. If it can’t be found on the free net, no one will use it. If it can’t be printed, no one will read it.” In the current business model for monographs, sales of only 300 or 400 copies are expected. In just one month, however, over 1900 downloads of chapters or entire books were recorded for one academic title that ANU has put online for free with a print-on-demand purchase option. Others have found that when books are on the net, more print copies are sold.

Libraries or librarians?

Scott Plutchak, director of the Lister Hill Library, University of Alabama, Birmingham, disagreed with the emphasis on books and book collections. Although he believes we “are entering a golden age of printed books, and we will always have printed books,” he was emphatic that the fundamental role of librarians “is not to build and manage collections and libraries.”

“Libraries do nothing—they are a tool that we as librarians use,” said Plutchak. “We build libraries because, in the final flowering of the print world, they are the best way to manage the knowledge base.”

Librarians should be going out of the library to meet constituents rather than creating ways to bring people in, Plutchak said, in the first of several eloquent admonitions. More important than building collections is building ser-

vices that will help “your boss sleep better.” Learn about the business of publishing, be bold, gamble, and take chances. Take the opportunity to reinvent the profession and rethink what we do.

Digitized books can facilitate opposing views of the role of library and librarian. They can be finding aids. They can be combined with print-on-demand and available for easy purchase. They can be easily and quickly delivered from shared collections.

The digitized book serves the library as place, building physical collections. It also makes the library a tool for librarians to provide their constituents with what they need.

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